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Soviets found developing better chemical weapons

By Bill Gertz
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The Soviet Union appears to be developing chemical agents capable of penetrating protective chemical warfare suits worn by NATO forces in Europe, a Pentagon official said yesterday.

"There is no question in our minds — it is a certainty in the intelligence community — that the Soviets have had for the last 10 years a goal of manufacturing [chemical] agents that will defeat our protective posture — our masks, our detectors, our medical therapy for casualties," said Thomas J. Welch, deputy assistant secretary of defense for chemical matters, during a briefing on the release of a report entitled "Soviet Chemical Weapons Threat."

The newly declassified Defense Intelligence Agency report says that the Soviets have developed a long-range chemical weapons strike capability.

Maps contained in the report show that the Soviets have 10 chemical weapons plants and nine storage depots in the Soviet Union and 32 forward deployment areas located in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. One graph indicates that the Soviets' chemical weapon storage capacity rose 16.2 percent between 1980 and 1985.

"This is a clear escalation by the Soviets and we're very much concerned about it," Mr. Welch said.

So far, the Soviets have not succeeded in deploying a new chemical weapon capable of penetrating cumbersome protective suits worn by soldiers to stave off chemical attack, Mr. Welch said.

"But we do know that they have used in Afghanistan chemical agents against Afghan people," he said. "And we do know that at least one or possibly two of the chemical agents that they have used are unknown to us, with the medical symptoms and other information that has come back suggesting to us — in my

judgment in a very strong way — that they have been using new agents."

Yesterday's briefing appeared to be a Pentagon lobbying effort to convince Congress to authorize funds for advanced chemical weapons production.

"Hundreds" of older chemical weapons munitions, many dating back to World War II with no military value, are leaking in storage "igloos" and a program to destroy the weapons would cost \$1.5 billion through 1994, Mr. Welch said.

"We want very much for the Congress to give us the green light to replace them with safer binary weapons to help that soldier out [and] at the same time destroy these older weapons," Mr. Welch said. Congress is scheduled to debate the 1986 appropriation tomorrow.

The House Appropriations Committee last week voted to delete \$163 million from the defense spending bill that had been earmarked for new chemical weapons.

Binary chemical weapons are made in two parts that are harmless until they are combined. The Pentagon has requested \$2.5 billion for an eight-year binary weapons program.

Current stockpiles, including the leaking munitions, contain lethal agents already mixed in one container. In the event of war, it would be hazardous to move the chemicals across land from storage facilities spread out through eight states, Mr. Welch said.

The new report states that "almost all Soviet conventional weapons systems from mortars to long-range tactical missiles have compatible chemical ammunition or warheads, and are available to their land, air and naval forces." The long-range missiles can carry either bulk agent or small bombs that can be dispersed over targets.

The Soviet army, which employs a special force of 45,000 "chemical troops," would double that number in wartime, the report states.